



PROJECT MUSE®

---

## The Madwoman and the Blindman

Bolt, David, Rodas, Julia Miele, Donaldson, Elizabeth J.

Published by The Ohio State University Press

Bolt, David & Rodas, Miele & Donaldson, J..

The Madwoman and the Blindman: Jayne Eyre, Discourse, Disability.

Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2013.

Project MUSE., <https://muse.jhu.edu/>.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/23963>

## THE MADWOMAN AND THE BLINDMAN

JULIA MIELE RODAS

ELIZABETH J. DONALDSON

DAVID BOLT

AS ONE OF THE most widely read and widely written about novels in the English language, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* (1847) holds an undisputed place in the Western canon and has been subject to critical and theoretical examinations from innumerable ideological, cultural, and literary perspectives. Despite extensive exegesis, however, the pervasive role of disability in the novel has yet to be fully recognized and articulated. While the reintroduction of Edward Fairfax Rochester at the close of the novel as a blind amputee compels one inescapable confrontation with significant physical and sensory impairment, readers too often experience this as the only encounter with disability. In fact, the presence of disability is by no means limited to this single representation. Bertha Mason Rochester, the infamous "madwoman" of the Thornfield attic, can also clearly be understood as a disabled character, one whose vocal, social, cognitive, or psychiatric impairment is exacerbated by mistreatment and neglect. In addition to the impairments of these two major characters, the novel also presents us with a range of other disabled subjects, including a collection of cousins who have singular psychic and social identities: the obsessive-compulsive Eliza Reed who shuns social intercourse and has each moment of her day scheduled "with

rigid regularity” (207; ch. 21);<sup>1</sup> the bilious John Reed, without apparent familial affection, a possible gambling addict who eventually commits suicide; the ascetic St. John who denies his fleshly appetites to the extent that he deliberately and contentedly invites his own death. Bertha’s family, an implicit spectral presence, is replete with disability, her brother Richard with “his feeble mind,” another brother “a complete dumb idiot,” and her mother “shut up in a lunatic asylum” (269; ch. 27). The life and philosophy of Jane’s closest childhood friend, Helen Burns, is thoroughly informed by her chronic degenerative illness. Even Jane herself is characterized in large part by her fundamental social anomaly, by a sense of distance and difference that shapes both her identity and her personal narrative.

Despite the abundance of disability, however, this aspect of the novel has remained strangely disguised in the interpretive writing that surrounds it; the extraordinary presence of disability is typically figured in alternative terms, as a tool for articulating spiritual values, as an expression of sexist oppression or imperialist complicity, or as a symbol of divine punishment. In this interpretive process, embodied experiences of impairment and disability are erased. Conventional interpretive practices, constructing disability as literary device rather than presence, have thus made it difficult for many readers to engage with, or even to recognize, the profusion of impairment and disability in the novel.

Manifestations of disability in *Jane Eyre* have traditionally been understood in almost purely symbolic terms. The blinding and maiming of Rochester, the amputation of his hand, and the “madness” of Bertha have generally been read as deliberately dramatic emblems of other problems within the novel, especially Rochester’s hubris and Jane’s powerlessness. Rather than occupying its own complex identity position, disability appears, for many readers, to exist as a kind of overlay, a caution against losing control or against defying social convention. Among the interpretive acts that read disability in these stereotypical terms, perhaps none has gained greater currency than Richard Chase’s analysis of Rochester’s blindness as a symbolic castration, an interpretive gesture so widely disseminated and consumed that it has come to represent the foundational meaning of blindness in *Jane Eyre*, despite the apparent contradiction of Rochester’s happy and fruitful marriage. This influential interpretation asserts a common literary and cultural convention, the “blindman”—a figure that serves as a conveniently reductive substitute for the real complexities of a visually impaired,

1. The version of the primary text referred to in this introduction is Charlotte Brontë, *Jane Eyre*, ed. Richard J. Dunn, 2nd ed. (New York and London: Norton, 1987).

male identity. This blindman figure presents a feminized rendition of Rochester, depleted and diminished, the loss of his left hand even suggesting phallic amputation.

The “madness” of Bertha, likewise, has most frequently been seen as standing in for some other veiled or unspeakable condition. Bertha is regarded, alternately, as an evocation of Jane’s tightly constrained interiority or as the “maddened double” of Brontë herself (Gilbert and Gubar, xi). Adrienne Rich sees the “madwoman” as a caution to the “powerless woman in the England of the 1840s,” Jane’s “opposite, her image horribly distorted in a warped mirror” (“Jane Eyre,” 469). Gayatri Spivak reads Bertha as a different sort of reflection: she is the colonial “Other,” a “figure produced by the axiomatics of imperialism” (“Three Women’s Texts,” 247). Her madness, for Spivak, represents the human/animal frontier that is central to the imperialist project of humanizing the Third World Other. Even fictional interpretations of the novel, like Jean Rhys’s groundbreaking *Wide Sargasso Sea*, seem to see Bertha’s disability as representing something else; in this instance, her “madness” is reconstructed as the strangulating mask of sexist and imperialist power imposed by an insecure and jealous husband, rather than as an intrinsic quality of Bertha’s embodied experience.

While acknowledging the massive debt owed to the community of scholars with whom we have shared *Jane Eyre*, this volume sets out not only to expand upon but also to depart from these long-standing interpretations, offering more nuanced readings of disability presence and asking vital questions about traditions of embodiment, representation, social intercourse, and identity. Customarily, impairment in *Jane Eyre* has been read unproblematically as loss, an undesired deviance from a condition of regularity vital to stable closure of the marriage plot. But the work of disability scholars informs and complicates our understanding of impairment and disability in Brontë’s text. For example, Lennard J. Davis has argued that the idea of disability emerges out of a Victorian context, citing the increasing use of statistics during this period, dating the first appearance of the word “normal” to 1840, and pointing to the “coming into consciousness” of the idea of the “norm” in the early years of the Victorian era (*Enforcing Normalcy*, 24). *Jane Eyre*’s representations of physiognomy and disability, likewise, participate in an emerging modern medical discourse, a discourse that leads, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson notes, to eugenics and the “ascending scientific discourse of pathology” at the end of the nineteenth century (*Extraordinary Bodies*, 74). Published in 1847, *Jane Eyre* predates many of the major discoveries in Victorian medicine, such as pasteurization and the germ theory of disease, yet the novel is contemporary with the early use of anesthesia

(other than alcohol and opiates) during surgery. Also contemporary with the publication of the novel is the opening of the Earlswood Asylum in 1847, which, in the wake of the Lunatics Act of 1845, signaled the beginning of a significant increase in the institutionalization of people with mental disabilities in large residential hospitals (Wright). *Jane Eyre* is, therefore, historically positioned at a time of radical transformation in the way Victorian bodies and minds were conceptualized, contained, and manipulated.

The legacy of this transformation has been crucial to disability activism and theory, and to disability studies more generally, for in many ways we exist in the context of an increasing medicalization of bodies and minds. Critiques of the “medical model” of disability have been foundational in disability rights activism. As Paul Longmore states, this model posits disability as “a defect located in individuals” and “thereby individualizes and privatizes what is in fundamental ways a social and political problem” (*Why I Burned My Book*, 4). In contrast, Longmore and others argue that disability should be theoretically repositioned as a primarily social, political, legal, and cultural phenomenon. In keeping with the practice of disability studies scholarship, this book builds on an ongoing critique of the medical model and reveals the social and historical context of disability as it is represented in *Jane Eyre*, including an investigation of contemporary medical knowledge and practice. As a canonical text in English literature and culture, published on the cusp of the development of conceptions of normalcy and of modern medicine as we know it, *Jane Eyre* is ripe for such critical engagement. Drawing on the work of disability theorists, as well as scholarship in women’s studies, deconstruction, autism studies, masculinity studies, caregiving, theology, psychoanalysis, and film studies, respectively, the contributors to this volume suggest that disability may have both a more pervasive and a more subtle and textured place in Brontë’s novel than has hitherto been acknowledged, guiding us to an enriched understanding both of *Jane Eyre* and of the meanings and functions of disability.

In the opening chapter, “The Corpus of the Madwoman: Toward a Feminist Disability Studies Theory of Embodiment and Mental Illness,” Elizabeth J. Donaldson builds on the tradition of previous feminist interpretations of the madwoman, proposing a disability studies reading attuned to the connections between physiognomy and madness in *Jane Eyre*. Donaldson argues that Bertha and Rochester reflect iconic contemporary images of raving and melancholy madness, a dyad famously depicted by Caus Gabriel Cibber’s sculptures at the gates of Bethlem “Bedlam” Hospital. A close reading of *Jane Eyre*, furthermore, reveals how the novel’s logic of physiognomy and phrenology establishes a clear link between physical

impairment and mental illness: Bertha's madness is both chronic and congenital, grounded in a family history of mental illness, while Rochester's is acute and accidental, caused in part by physical trauma. Positioned in the context of Gilbert and Gubar's quintessential reading of Bertha as Jane's "maddened double" (xi), Donaldson departs from the established madness-as-rebellion narrative and rejects the legacy of antipsychiatric readings of the text in order to open a new theoretical space for the analysis of embodiment and mental illness. Using feminist science studies and theories of the body along with insights gained from disability scholarship, she calls for alternate feminist readings of madness that take into account the lived, corporeal experience of mental illness and impairments.

In keeping with the feminist interpretations that have become an essential part of *Jane Eyre's* theoretical and critical history, the second chapter is informed by a blend of recent and classic works of feminism. Indeed, as is suggested in the title, "The Blindman in the Classic: Feminisms, Ocularcentrism, and *Jane Eyre*," David Bolt frequently points to Gilbert and Gubar's influential study. In his deconstructive reading, however, some feminisms become troubled by the exposure of the normative nature of literary sightedness. After all, the term *ocularcentrism* denotes a perspective and, by extension, a subject position that is dominated by vision. The contention is that, grounded in ocularcentric epistemology and thus instrumental in shoring up what Garland-Thomson calls the "normate's boundries," the trope of the blindman is both ableist and patriarchal (*Extraordinary Bodies*, 8). That is to say, Bolt teases out the inherent bias in Brontë's depiction of the blind Rochester, arguing that such a representation is incompatible with established feminist commendations of the novel. This problem is illustrated in a comparison between *Jane Eyre* and a selection of overtly ocularcentric constructs perpetuated by Rudyard Kipling, Sigmund Freud, and John Milton. Bolt's central concern is not that a female character's empowerment is emphasized by a male counterpart's disempowerment but that male disempowerment is here engendered by a patriarchal mythos of blindness.

The third chapter turns away from Bertha and Rochester, the characters who more evidently embody disability in *Jane Eyre*, to suggest that the novel's heroine may herself be understood in terms of disability identity. "On the Spectrum': Rereading Contact and Affect in *Jane Eyre*" engages the early writing of autism pioneers Leo Kanner and Hans Asperger and considers Jane's unusual affect and sociality within the context of medical, theoretical, and autobiographical writing on autism, ultimately suggesting that Jane occupies a place on the autistic spectrum. Julia Miele Rodas argues that readers tend to contextualize Jane's emotional experience, the interior-

ity of her passionate emotional life, her reduced affect, and the concealing of her deeply rooted feelings in terms of cultural history, understanding her extreme self-control and apparent poise as fitting with historically appropriate social conventions. Rodas points out, however, that because readers experience this self-control from the inside, Jane's passions are highly visible and her most obvious autistic characteristics—her silence, flattened affect and remoteness—have rarely been noticed or questioned beyond a feminist context. This chapter claims that Jane's aloofness and social idiosyncrasy do not represent a tacit acceptance—as some have argued—of the exploitation and oppression of subject peoples but point rather to the political significance of solitude. Thus, Jane achieves new political stature, becoming a model for effective resistance to social control, her “private fecundity seeding possibilities for oppressed and marginalized peoples, especially autistic persons,” who reject the punishing demands of “compulsory sociality.”

Margaret Rose Torrell's “‘From India-Rubber Back to Flesh’: A Reevaluation of Male Embodiment in *Jane Eyre*” explores how Brontë's display of male bodies performs interventions into cultural attitudes about gender and ability and gestures toward a nonhegemonic model of masculinity, which is complemented (rather than conflicted) by physical disability. The chapter examines how embodied status has been used as a dividing line between genders in Euro-American culture, creating a double binary of gender and embodiment, which links masculinity to disembodiment and femininity to embodiment and its counterpart, disability. But while the novel may be said to uphold ableist conceptions in its reconfigurations of gender hierarchies, Torrell argues that there are also moments in which both the gender and ability binaries become unmoored. One such moment is located in the final portrayal of Rochester. According to Torrell, Brontë's representation of Rochester's embodied masculinity, coupled with Jane's embodied femininity, facilitates a reevaluation of both gender and ability hierarchies. For Torrell, then, Rochester achieves a fairly progressive integration of disability and masculinity that anticipates the type of nonoppressive, embodied masculinity discussed by contemporary disability scholars and theorists of masculinity: “just as the India-rubber stretches into flesh, so too does the model of masculinity stretch to encompass new, more inclusive possibilities for male embodiment.”

D. Christopher Gabbard's “From Custodial Care to Caring Labor: The Discourse of Who Cares in *Jane Eyre*” situates the novel vis-à-vis 1840s public policy reforms aimed at improving the treatment of mentally ill and disabled people. Gabbard observes that in narrating her story during the decade's latter half, Jane reenacts in miniature the spirit of the national

reforms. The chapter presents two cycles of caregiving and disability—Rochester and Bertha in the 1820s and 1830s followed by Jane and Rochester in the 1830s and 1840s—with the two cycles manifesting a paradigm shift in philosophies of caregiving. Gabbard argues that Jane’s discovery of the difference between Rochester’s “custodial care” and the Rivers’ “caring labor” is brought about by her contact with Bertha and the protagonist’s subsequent wandering on the heath and convalescence at Moor House. By recourse to Ato Quayson’s “implied interlocutor,” Gabbard refreshes our understanding of *Jane Eyre* as *bildungsroman*, inferring that Jane develops morally through contact with Bertha, growing in her understanding and ethical consideration of divergent abilities. The reform Jane implements in the treatment of disability is seen in the way she interacts with Rochester at the end, bringing to the fore one of the novel’s major themes: the responsibility of the individual charged with caring for another who is unable to live independently. Gabbard argues that the novel privileges the caregiving approaches exemplified by Maria Temple and the Rivers family and implicitly censures those of Rochester, Mrs. Reed, and Mr. Brocklehurst.

Essaka Joshua’s “‘I Began to See’: Biblical Models of Disability in *Jane Eyre*” brings a theological perspective to the project. As Joshua notes, Brontë was “an adept commentator, absorber and interpreter of biblical material, and it is no surprise, given the extent of biblical allusion in *Jane Eyre*, that her biblical intertexts engage with disability.” This chapter establishes an important context for reading biblical references within the novel, pointing out that Judeo-Christian scripture itself deploys several models of disability, some negative (e.g., the associations with sin and punishment) and some positive (e.g., the associations with discipleship and spiritual worth). Joshua argues that the novel centers discussion of biblical disability on the spiritual role of sight and blindness and on the physical body’s relationship to the spiritual body, and that the allusions to biblical disability in *Jane Eyre* emphasize positive, spiritual gains. In fact, it appears that through her choice of biblical texts, “Brontë dissociates stigma and disability,” reinforcing the idea “that disability is a symbol of being saved or chosen, and that it is a route to salvation.” Reading the novel with attention to its use of biblical references to disability, Joshua provides a more progressive understanding of the novel’s account of disability than is often suggested. The chapter concludes that, if we read in the light of Brontë’s consistently redemptionist agenda, Rochester’s disability may be understood not as a punishment but rather as an indication of his spiritual well-being.

Susannah Mintz’s “Illness, Disability, Recognition in *Jane Eyre*” proposes that the novel reveals the cost of denying or suppressing difference

and longs for an alternative form of engagement with embodiment. Making use of the psychoanalytic theory of recognition, this chapter contends that Brontë records the possibility of a form of interaction that acknowledges and accepts the frailties of the body. Recognition insists that true acknowledgement of another's subjectivity is possible—indeed, that it is the basis of political and cultural understanding. Brontë's novel, fascinated as it is by bodies, bodily shape, facial features, extremities of sickness and injury, renders these as axes of heightened intersubjective possibility where subjects are tested for their capacity to tolerate and respect. Representations of disease, disability, or atypical bodies complicate the idea that these are inevitably problematical conditions rather than incidental to problems of social arrangement. In its emphasis on intersubjective regard as a means of disrupting hierarchical binaries of dis/ability, the novel reminds readers of the need for less restrictive or determinative ways of thinking about bodies, selves, illness, and relationships. Mintz juxtaposes the text's unsurprising participation in the structures of normalcy against its depiction of what might obtain between people in a world where "irregularity"—a word that recurs frequently in reference to the shape and symmetry of people's bodies—does not need to be repaired. *Jane Eyre* openly displays troubled bodies, not to make them the fascinating or pitiable spectacles of the readerly stare but rather to return, time and again, to the scene of potential recognition.

In our closing chapter, Martha Stoddard Holmes brings film studies and disability studies together to examine how the novel's descriptions of disability have been portrayed in five key film adaptations ranging from 1944 to 2006. Even though for some readers Rochester's injured body facilitates Jane's desire for him, his disabled body simultaneously presents a series of representational challenges for twentieth- and twenty-first century screen versions of the novel. This chapter, "Visions of Rochester: Screening Desire and Disability in *Jane Eyre*," shows that while Brontë is direct and concrete in her descriptions of Rochester's injuries—he has lost an eye and a hand—and their appearance, film versions vary considerably in organizing special effects makeup, costume, and *mise-en-scène* to depict these impairments. While most versions render Rochester's blindness visible through makeup and props, many counter the film adaptation's need for compression by supplementing the dialogue in which Jane and Rochester work through the meaning of his disability—including its supposed implications for sexuality and marriage. Several add dialogue that frames blindness with angry assumptions of pity, culminating in a rebuff of Jane that does not align with the text of the novel. Further, only one version renders visible Rochester's

amputation. Taken in the aggregate, Holmes observes, while film versions of *Jane Eyre* do articulate desire in the context of blindness, anger and pity are presented as obligatory gatekeepers to the happy ending.

These chapters are connected not simply by their engagement with *Jane Eyre* and disability in general but also by their engagement with other more specific themes and critical traditions. The chapters speak to, with, and sometimes against each other. While both Donaldson and Gabbard begin with a reconsideration of Bertha's mental illness, each has a different critical focus: Donaldson, the embodiment of mental illness; Gabbard, the act of caregiving. Bolt brings the process of deconstruction to the figure of the blindman and its ocularcentric premise, both in the novel itself and in the feminist literary criticism that follows. Though working within a similar framework, Torrell deconstructs binaries of male disembodiment and female embodiment. Joshua seeks to recuperate blindness in *Jane Eyre* in the critical context of biblical studies, which contrasts somewhat with Holmes's work on the proliferation of modern film versions. Finally, Rodas positions Jane on the autism spectrum, giving her intense interior life and solitude a positive valence, yet Mintz stresses the close connection between Jane and Rochester and the "heightened intersubjective" relationship that their marriage reveals.

Collectively, these chapters argue that disability is crucial to a critically engaged reading of *Jane Eyre*. The madwoman and the blindman of our title call attention to the central critique of this book, that the massive tradition of scholarship around Brontë's famous novel has largely been content to read the disability of Rochester and Bertha (and other representations of disability in *Jane Eyre*) as static symbol rather than as complex embodiment with meaning, context, and potential beyond that ascribed to the blindman or madwoman tropes. *The Madwoman and the Blindman*, then, marks just one moment in an ongoing conversation about *Jane Eyre*, about the value of disability, and about the importance of disability theory.

This page intentionally left blank